

---

# MEDICAL HISTORY

---

## PREVENTION BEGAN EARLY: CHARLES EDWIN BENTLEY, DDS 1859-1929

Clifton O. Dummett, DDS  
Los Angeles, California

If Charles E. Bentley, an 1887 graduate of the Chicago College of Dental Surgery, were alive to see the changes in attitudes toward disease prevention and public health measures in health care, he would be more than just pleased. He would feel fully vindicated and rewarded for the zeal and determination he exercised to secure health benefits for the American people.

At the Illinois State Dental Society meeting in 1896, young Dr. Bentley, a Chicago practitioner, said, "If only the people can have an elementary knowledge of the human body, and of such principles of hygiene and sanitation that exist under the increasingly complex conditions of modern life, they may be able to guard against common forms of infection and against unwholesome modes of life and many ills that follow as a consequence."

This concept became the cornerstone of Bentley's thrust to promote a broad-based program of dental education designed to encourage the entire population to take a personal interest in methods of attaining individual oral hygiene to preserve the health of the oral tissues and prevent tooth decay

and other oral diseases. He was also deeply aware that many could not afford dental treatment, and the special needs of the less fortunate should be met. Moreover, he saw the public school system as the ideal avenue to reach all children without distinction as to race, religion, or socioeconomic condition.

Although Bentley's proposals in 1900 for dental examinations by dentists in the public schools, free clinics, and wide dissemination of dental health information to the public did not find immediate acceptance among his dental colleagues, his persistence and ardent oratory won sufficient support to initiate limited implementations.

A major breakthrough came in 1906, when the Illinois State Dental Society adopted Bentley's resolution to create "a commission to investigate the dental needs of the children of the schools of the state." And the following year the Society voted to prepare a booklet on basic facts about the care of the mouth and teeth. In 1910, project chairman Bentley reported the publication and distribution of a 32-page brochure entitled "The Care of the Mouth."

Bentley cultivated media exposure for the oral hygiene movement and received a boost when Horace Fletcher, nationally famed health lecturer and proponent of natural foods, was presented on a program sponsored by the Odontographic Soci-

---

Requests for reprints should be sent to Dr. Clifton O. Dummett, P.O. Box 77006, Los Angeles, CA 90007.

ety of Chicago. Bentley, founder of the Society in 1888, was program chairman of this event, which attracted 3,000 persons to Orchestra Hall to hear "The Gateway to Health and Efficiency." The October 28, 1910, edition of the *Chicago Record-Herald* reported the lecture under the caption "To Save Children by Better Eating."

Bentley continued to write, speak, and lobby in behalf of his proposition at every opportunity, spreading the message to neighboring midwestern states by attendance at the various state and local dental society meetings. He was not dismayed by lukewarm responses but was stimulated by an unswerving belief in the rightness of the oral hygiene movement as an integral part of improved general health. His detailed plans laid the groundwork for gradual implementation as the oral hygiene movement gained both recognition and acceptance by the profession and the public. A significant indication of success was the designation of "First Dental Week" by Chicago's Mayor William Hale Thompson in December 1916. This widely publi-

cized dental declaration by the chief elected official of one of the nation's largest cities placed oral hygiene center stage in health concerns and contributed to its eventual spread across the United States.

Bentley's deep involvement with professional programs and policies was coupled with an intense commitment to social and civic progress. He gained wide acknowledgment of his yeoman services in interracial activities in Chicago, including the founding of Provident Hospital, and nationally as one of the founders of The Niagara Movement, predecessor of the NAACP, on whose board of directors he held lifelong membership.

Dr. Bentley, an affluent, socially prominent private dental practitioner of Chicago, was born in 1859 and died in 1929, leaving a rich legacy in community oral health and interracial progress to the people of the United States. His foresight, perseverance, and devotion to his fellow man mark this gifted Afro-American father of the oral hygiene movement in the United States.

## It's Not Enough Just To Have Your Blood Pressure Checked.

If it's high, you have to stay on your medication to keep it under control. Some 34 million Americans have high blood pressure, but only half of them know it. And of those who know it's high, more than half of them don't have it under control. Left uncontrolled, high blood pressure may lead to stroke, heart attack or kidney failure.

The American Heart Association is fighting to reduce early death and disability from heart disease and stroke with research, professional and public education, and community service programs.

But more needs to be done.

You can help us save lives by having your blood pressure checked, staying on your medication if it's high, and sending your dollars today to your American Heart Association, listed in your telephone directory.



Arthur Ashe, National Campaign Chairman  
American Heart Association



**American Heart  
Association**

WE'RE FIGHTING FOR YOUR LIFE